

## A CHAT ABOUT COFFEE.



**I**T is a curious thing that coffee is imported in large quantities here, bought in large quantities, roasted, ground, made, and drunk, and yet one of the first things an Englishman learns when he leaves home is that

there is no such thing as coffee in England. It is only twenty miles across to Calais. You can go there in ninety minutes, and when you get there, you can get—coffee. At this side of the silver streak it is not to be accomplished. It is another curious remark to be made upon the same subject, that the candid Frenchman (if you should happen to come across him) will admit that coffee is not to be had in France either. He relegates you to Vienna, where you certainly can get it very strong, very hot, and very dear. But the candid Frenchman is rather a rarity, and so the claims of Vienna are overlooked, and we settle down to the general idea that if you want a cup of coffee you must go to France for it. Curious that we cannot obtain it in our own country, where we are so enormously rich and so devoted to *le comfortable*; curious that at any little railway station, that at any insignificant restaurant in some provincial town, you can get, at any hour of the day (or night), an excellent cup of coffee for a few *sous*, and that here in London it is almost impossible to get it for any money; curious—but true.

And curious also that a beverage which is so universal should be, comparatively speaking, so modern. How did people in the sixteenth century do without it? National characteristics were very much what they are still; how did the Frenchman of the period live without his cup of coffee? Was he the same chatty, gossiping, self-contented citizen? Did he sit in the open air and play dominoes then, with his poodle-dog looking on, apparently the more intelligent animal of the two? and if he did, what did he drink? Is it not strange to think of a Paris street without the familiar *garçon* in the foreground, pouring out the hot coffee and the hot milk, and receiving for his special gain the accustomed halfpenny? And yet Madame de Sévigné, speaking of Racine, and giving her opinion of that popular dramatist to the coterie who surrounded her, magnificently dismissed the poet into obscurity with a sentence. "My friends," she said, "the taste for Racine and the taste for this new drink will go out together." Now, the new drink was coffee.

It came from Upper Egypt, according to the best accounts; and there, it would seem, they took it not after dinner, but at it. The berry was powdered and mixed with grease, formed into a kind of paste; and when these savages went to war coffee figured as their principal rations. Civilised Europeans were peaceable on wine, while savage Africans went to war on coffee. There is a legend about it also—a legend of which a pious Mussulman is the hero. The Mussulman used to get sleepy during his devotions, and so he prayed to Mahomet, who came to his aid. Mahomet sent him for advice to a goatherd, who took a hint from his goats. He observed that when these animals ate the berries of a particular tree they got frisky and excited—bounded about all the night, in fact. The Mussulman took the hint, ate the coffee-berries, slept less, and, no doubt, prayed better. That was the legend. That coffee, however, was sold in the streets of Cairo towards the end of the sixteenth century is not a matter of legend, but of history. In fact it was not only sold, but it was forbidden to be sold. An Arabian historian recounts that in the year 1538 a *café* was attacked by the authorities, and the customers who were found on the spot hurried off to prison, from which they were not liberated till they had each received seventeen strokes with a stick, *pour encourager les autres*. And, in fact, this raid served that purpose so excellently, that five-and-twenty years afterwards the town of Cairo could boast of more than 2,000 shops where coffee might be bought. From Cairo to Constantinople was, in those days, a necessary transition, and the new drink, once established in Europe, soon made its way to the West. It is recorded that the first cup of coffee known to have been prepared in France was handed to Louis XIV. to drink. It was a royal beverage in those days: a pound of it cost about £5 16s. But this extravagance of price must have abated soon, for not long afterwards several shops were opened for its sale, and in 1647, Thévenot, giving a very select dinner-party, offered each of his guests, after their wine, a cup of coffee. But the house where the French aristocracy believed they tasted the new-fashioned drink to greatest perfection was the Turkish ambassador's. The "afternoon coffees"—if we may coin such a word—given by Soliman Aga were famous all through Paris, and the Eastern drink was served in a style of Eastern magnificence. The new fashion was destined to advance still further West. Its introduction to England is well known. In 1652 an Eastern merchant, named Edwards, opened a *café* in Newman's Court, Cornhill, and conceived the happy idea of having his customers served by a page dressed in Turkish costume. How popular in time it became, we can guess from the constant allusions in the novels and letters of the period. In fact, the demand soon became so great that it was necessary to consider the supply. The Dutch were the first to acclimatise the coffee-plant, and the history of its acclimatisation includes a dramatic incident. In 1740, seventeen

young trees were brought over to Amsterdam, and there planted with great care. Having struck root, they were removed to Paris, where Jussieu, the famous professor of botany, received them as if they were royal guests. Of course, in Europe they could only lead a lingering-invalid kind of existence; it was resolved to try change of air for them: Jussieu had to part with his *protégés*. The three little trees were consigned to the special care of Captain Desclieux. On the voyage two died; it was doubtful whether even one could be preserved; but the captain shared his ration of fresh water with the young plant, and it was still alive when the vessel touched land. It was planted in Martinique. The soil was found to suit the new importation, and soon Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Domingo, Cayenne, and Jamaica all boasted of their coffee plantations. In the meantime what was a luxury had become almost a necessity for the Parisians; instead of the Turkish ambassador receiving the aristocracy of France and regaling them with this rare dainty, men used to parade the streets and offer to fill the cups of their customers, and supply them with sugar as well, for two *sous*. The coffee-merchant would be summoned to mount the narrow staircases, and introduce his steaming coffee-pot and apparatus into the rooms of his *clientèle*. The sugar was an important item in this transaction, at two *sous*, and shows how much one branch of commerce serves to develop another. Up to that time sugar was not a household requisite, but a drug; it was sold at the apothecaries', and was bought by the ounce. A similar fashion lingers still in out-of-the-way places, and to this day the best tea in a Welsh town is to be bought at a chemist's. But when coffee was largely taken, sugar became detached from the category of spices, and was sold by the pound instead of the ounce, and thus that cup of coffee which the Grand Monarque drank with such state had an importance of which he little guessed. In Louis XIII.'s time sugar was merely a medicine, and even in the reign of his successor the ill-natured gossip of the day ran that Mademoiselle Scarron on one occasion bent back the lock of her sugar-case, so that she might save the expense of supplying her guests. Thus the glass of *eau sucré*, which seems to us such an absurd refreshment, was in those days an expensive luxury. It is on record that at Thionville the military seized all the sugar belonging to some rebellious merchant, flung it into a well, and then summoned the inhabitants of the town to regale themselves gratuitously on *eau sucré*.

But Paris was not left very long dependent on the services of peripatetic coffee-vendors. Shops were opened—the first in 1672—and a new era in Paris life may be said to have thus commenced. The earlier establishments were mean and uncomfortable, till at last the famous Café Procope was established. It is but a short time since it has passed away, and with it a whole series of literary associations. It seems almost strange that the authorities did not make a *monument historique* of the place, and preserve it for future generations. Here it was that Voltaire, and La Fontaine, and Fontenelle used to pass long

hours, and Piron, too, who having been refused a seat in the Academy, wrote his own epitaph—

"Ci-gît Piron, qui fut rien  
Sans même Académicien."

Procope's venture was so successful that a swarm of other speculators followed in his steps, and in Louis XV.'s time the *cafés* of Paris were numbered at over 600. Of course their enumeration *now* has become impossible. And yet while the French seem to be always drinking coffee, and ridicule us for our preference of tea, their own consumption is strangely small. It is calculated that, whereas each German consumes 4 lbs. of coffee in the year, each Dane 5½ lbs., and each inhabitant of the United States 7 lbs., the consumption in France averages but 2½ lbs. And yet the drinking of coffee seems to be quite an employment of time amongst the people, and is by no means confined to the upper orders. A purchase with us involves the simplest of commercial transactions. We have only to buy the coffee, to make it, and to drink it. But in France every house has its own method of roasting and powdering the bean. There are coffee-roasters of all sizes and shapes, and if you rise early in the morning you will see the little charcoal furnace on its tripod, and the wheel slowly going round. Indeed the superiority of French coffee is mainly due to its being ground and made almost immediately after it has been roasted. The taste of the fire is fresh upon it, and not the taste only, but the smell. And they are careful about the most minute particulars. If only one cup of coffee has to be made, the French servant goes through the regular routine as cautiously as if she was supplying the whole company. Even the grounds are respected. They are not allowed to remain in the filter, nor is the coffee left standing in the coffee-pot. The delicacy of its taste—its bouquet—would be gone. The tannin of the berry would soon act on the metal; and, indeed, it is to this chemical combination that the bitter taste and dark colour of English coffee may be most frequently attributed. Another mistake we make is that we grind our coffee too finely. Brillat-Savarin, the great authority on the subject in Paris, never used a mill at all, but simply put the beans in a mortar and brayed them. Boiling water readily absorbs, during filtration, so much of the essence as is really desirable; and when you use too fine a powder, you gain nothing in strength, and sacrifice clearness and limpidity.

One cannot leave the subject without insisting, for the favourite beverage of men of letters, on the praise to which their choice seems to entitle it. In France, in Germany, in England, once coffee was introduced, it was almost immediately adopted by poets and literary men. We have mentioned Fontenelle, Voltaire, and Piron. In more recent times Balzac was a notorious imbibor. Once he fancied himself ill, and his friends were anxious about him. They pressed to know what was the matter. "I am dying," he said, in mock-heroic tones—"I am dying of 25,000 cups of coffee." But even so wholesale a consumption led to no fatal results, and the great novelist lived to add many more cups to the record of his consumption.